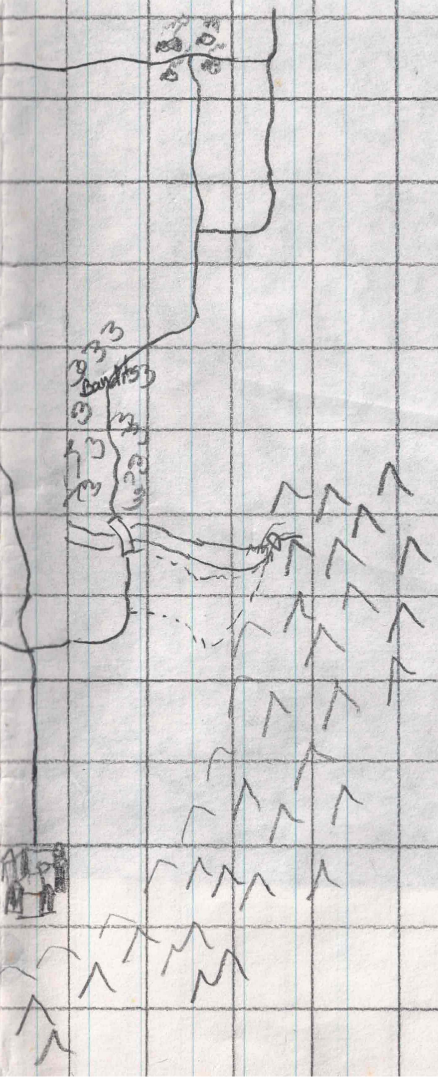

Bandits

ephemerMAL
vol. 1

The original plan had been to set the time machine for exactly ten years earlier. Ten years and one day earlier was when they had buried the device. The area where it had been buried was now at least fifty feet underwater. The device was prone to water damage, and the signal had gotten weaker, and then stopped. He wasn't sure if he could bring it back, or if the map would travel with him. He had committed as much of it to memory as he could.

The plan was for him to get the device to safety, and then lay low without crossing paths with his then-times self. They had never been clear about how he'd get back, or what effect his presence might have. Everything for the mission. It even said that in Latin on the patch on his jacket. A sudden bang, flashing lights and everything looks different. He spots a newspaper stand and checks the date. Somehow, he has overshot his destination by thirty years.

The map made it too, but what use is it without the program? And what will he do for thirty years? Thinking back, he remembers that there were early computers by this time. But he's just a duty officer. He doesn't program. And is he still in the same time/space continuum? The map will be useless in another world. He spots a bookstore and buys an oversize atlas. At a nearby copy shop he has the map shot onto a transparency, and borrows an overhead projector. The atlas has a city in the right location, but the name is different. Projecting his map onto the page of the atlas with that city, he confirms his worst fears. He has not landed in the time or place near where he was sent.

Skot Armstrong 2022

TOMBWORLD

By Will Heydt

The problems started when we reached the bottom of the maze.

We spent the first month of summer playing TOMBWORLD. The game came out on my sister's birthday and since she was too short to reach the keyboard, we put the Apple //e on the floor and surrounded ourselves with fans to keep it from melting down.

Our parents also had plenty of time on their hands, being Professors at a college that didn't offer summer school. They were happy we were entertaining ourselves. They were involved in a game of their own. There was a missing person and a state-wide search underway. Middle class citizens everywhere were compiling their clues and comparing notes in light of a widespread belief in the incompetence of the local authorities. Our dad talked about going down to the college and using the Cray-1 Supercomputer to analyze all the leads and spit out the location of the missing person. But he only ever talked about it.

With no parental supervision, we played TOMBWORLD from dawn to dusk, ignoring the pain behind our eyes, stopping only when we ran out of graph paper for the next maze. The graphics were simple—just white lines on a black background, the monsters blobs of pink, yellow, and green, only a few degrees from total abstraction, and so our imagination and creativity was poured into those maps. We added colors from a box of colored pencils, dozens more than the computer could muster, and we marked the various traps, dead-ends, treasures, and merchants with a growing repertoire of symbols and their calligraphic translations.

But the game was only 146K in size and its seeming infinity shrunk until we reached the bottom of the maze and there was nothing left but a screen that glowed:

* * * CONGRATULATIONS * * *

YOU HAVE RECOVERED THE AMULET FROM THE MAD OVERLORD. WEAR THE CHEVRON (>) OF RANK WITH HONOR

After a few days of sitting around rereading old books, my sister had the idea for me to put one of our mother's scarves over her eyes, effectively blinding her. I led her around the neighborhood and when we got home she drew a map on graph paper of this new "maze". We marked it with the same symbols as `TOMBWORLD`. There was "|_|" for a pit trap where part of the road had sunk downwards into a pothole. The neighbor with a yard full of rusting junk had the symbol of a merchant. The freeway was an impassable river that partially circumscribed the maze.

Meanwhile, the search for the missing person had mutated. A body was found floating in the lake's green waters. Our neighborhood set up a curfew and the man with the junk in his yard put up floodlights. News broke that a local hospital had discharged patients from its psychiatric ward due to cuts in state funding. Faces of the patients with violent histories streamed across the television screen on the nightly news as our parents watched transfixed. Every one of them was a suspect, whereabouts unknown. Our father scribbled notes about them into a leatherbound journal and our mother made sketches of the photos. I thought they looked even more frightening when she drew them.

One morning my sister got up before sunrise. She went into our mom's study and took out a fresh sheet of graph paper and started drawing in the dark. When I turned on the light, she didn't flinch. She showed me her work: a continuation of our neighborhood "maze" that started from the point where we'd left off—the crumbling remains of a White Castle—and continued into unexplored territory. She'd drawn a spiraling series of passage-ways that led to a center, and the symbol of a skull thereon.

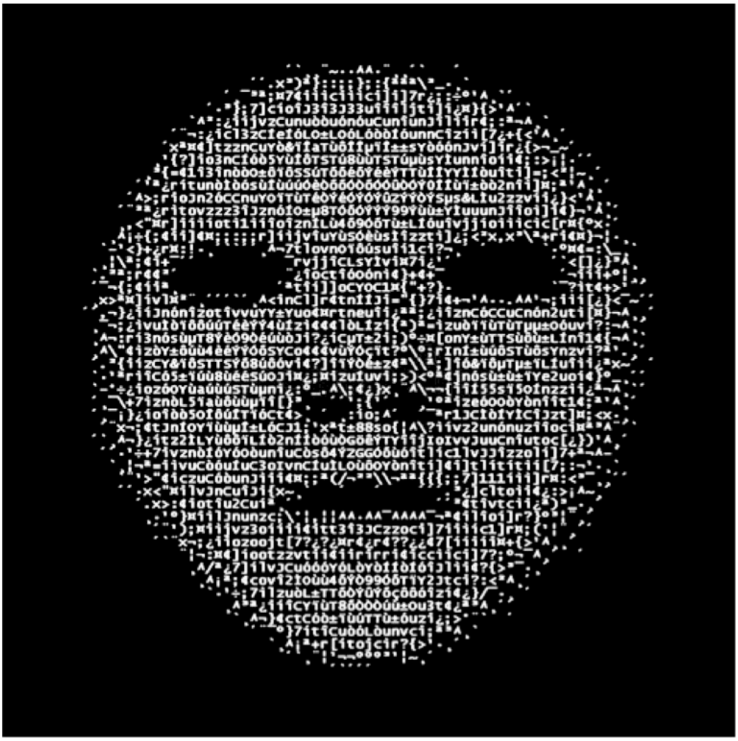
I was the one blindfolded now, my sister leading me by the hand. It felt as though I were moving through the dark subterranean routes of `TOMBWORLD` and if I pressed my eyes tightly shut, white geometries seemed to appear, the tracery of dungeon walls leading to a vanishing point. Under my feet the ground changed from pavement to earth. The hiss of cars driving past faded and wind and birdsong filled the void. It began to rain, light and cool, and I wondered what symbol should mark this part of the maze. A rune, perhaps, the mark of a spell etched into the sky.

I didn't have a jacket, I hadn't expected to be out this late. The air thickened and took on a smell I could only explain as extreme sterility. My sister told me to stop. She asked me what I could see, here, at the bottom of the maze. Without removing the blindfold I tried very hard to look into the unseen. Shining in the darkness, it appeared—a half-cylindrical tower. Alternating panels of light and dark. Striking contrasts of metallic panels. It was such an odd rectilinear structure.

I took off my blindfold and there it stood, exactly as I had seen it in the darkness. But now there was more. `ZONE-A` it said on the concrete wall. The room was very large, but it was so faintly illuminated by weak, dotlike lights and terminal screens which shimmered bluish white that it was impossible to see the walls. The air conditioning hissed softly.

My sister was kneeling beside the tower, feeding it like a hungry creature. She had our mother's sketches of the madmen. All of them went into the monster. Magnetic tape whirred inside as it digested the information, and a huge screen in the ceiling lit up. It took a moment before I could understand the different lines, glowing white on black.

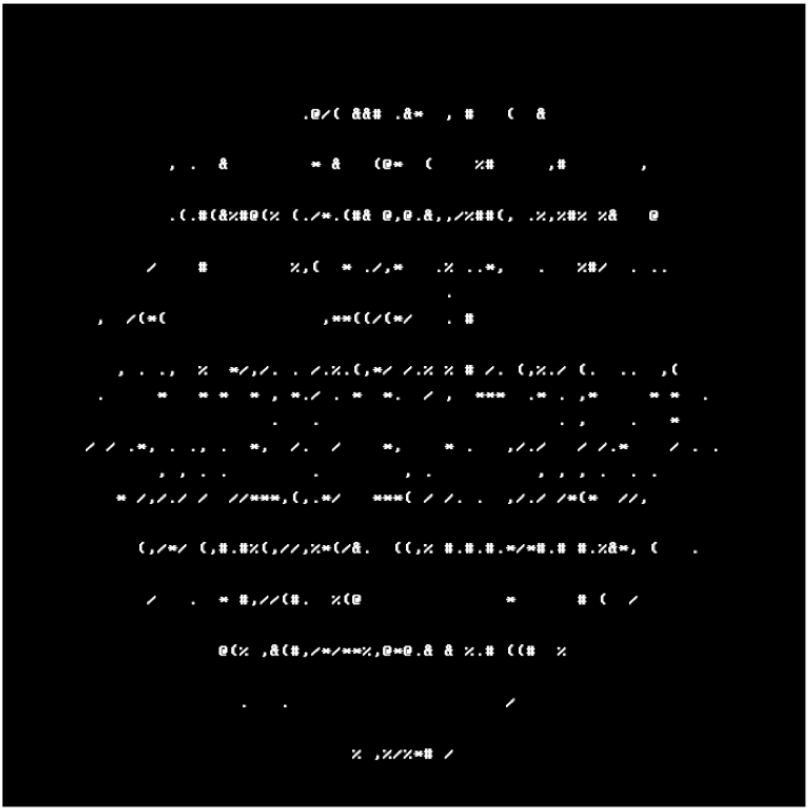
On the screen, this is what we saw:



"I entered all the raw data," my sister explained. "The computer's showing us who did it. It's showing us the killer."

But neither of us understood who it was. It was both the faces on the news and the people who told the news. It was the faces in the commercials. The man who came to fix the television, who sold us our computer, the pictures on the walls of our house, on the fridge and above the mantle.

We decided to take a print out of the image and feed it back into the tower to see if we could get a better answer. My sister's hand played across the switches and they moved like a host of birds. On the screen, this is what we saw:



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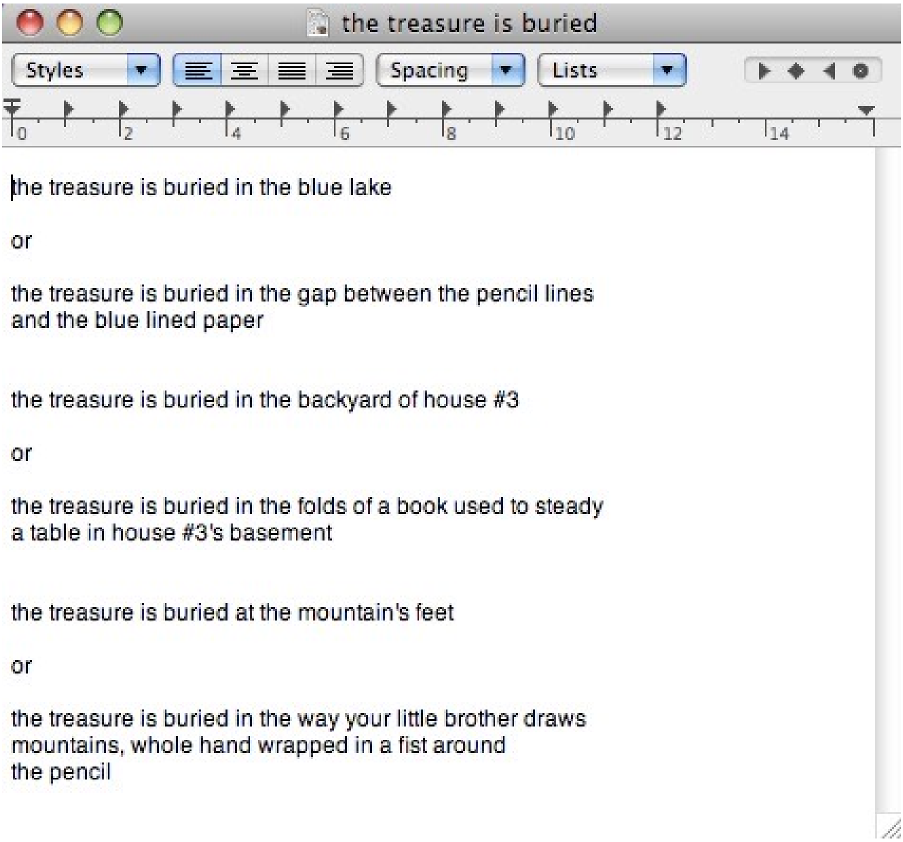
Every time after that turned up images of pure darkness. I pressed my fingers into my eyes but no white lines appeared. By now it was curfew time in our neighborhood and we had to get back as quickly as we could. I kept the blindfold in my pocket and neither of us put it on. The man with all the rusted junk in his yard had found more lights, somehow, and was sitting on his porch with a megaphone in case he saw something. I made a mental note to put the symbol of such a thing on our map the next morning as we snuck by.

When we got home we found our parents still awake. They weren't mad at us. They were watching the evening news.



the treasure is buried in the blue lake

or

the treasure is buried in the gap between the pencil lines
and the blue lined paper

the treasure is buried in the backyard of house #3

or

the treasure is buried in the folds of a book used to steady
a table in house #3's basement

the treasure is buried at the mountain's feet

or

the treasure is buried in the way your little brother draws
mountains, whole hand wrapped in a fist around
the pencil

-Tegan Webb

"It just fell out of the book," he said.

"The spellbook?"

"Yeah. I guess that water is the lake down in the park."

"What are those mountain-things though? We don't even have a hill near here. Are you sure this isn't some other town?"

"All those streets match up though."

[@twitter@joshgiesbrecht]

Once, We Were Cartographers

Stephen Cass

“This book does not contain a map. Please feel free to draw your own”—that’s the preface to Terry Pratchett’s *Sourcery*, published in 1988 as an early installment in Pratchett’s fantasy satire Discworld series. I guffawed at this line as a 16-year-old, enjoying the jab at other fantasy writers’ entrenched habit of aping Tolkein’s Middle Earth maps. Their books bulged with earnestly baroque continents sprawling from flyleaf to flyleaf, usually serving only to unintentionally highlight the text’s derivative nature.

Looking back on that joke now, I also see it as a marker of a lost era. *Sourcery* was released at a time when its readers were in fact routinely drawing their own maps. Indeed, 1988 was likely the very apex of personal cartography, an activity that would soon begin to fade from the skillset of the general public, just as surely as dressmaking or decent hand writing.

Of course, people had been making their own maps long before the late 1980s, but primarily as aids in navigating real spaces, and frequently as a way to share knowledge between those familiar with an area and newcomers. Invitations were often accompanied by simplified maps showing the route to an event from some established landmark. A friend would sketch out how to locate a shop amidst the jumble of narrow streets in the old part of town. Or a lost motorist might plaintively ask “can you draw me a map?” when faced with a barrage of well-meaning verbal directions at a gas station.

But the late 1970s and early 1980s saw the last great evolution in personal map making. We began mapping the unreal in earnest.

To be sure, this was far from the first time that fictional spaces had been charted. In addition to Tolkein’s Middle Earth example, there were phenomena such as the centuries-long tradition of creating detailed topographies of the circles of hell as described in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. But such maps and illustrations were made by professionals, or at least entered people’s lives through professional reproductions. Fictional spaces were rarely mapped by individuals because few individuals had a pressing need for such navigational tools.

However, in this period two things happened. First, TSR’s *Dungeons and Dragons* became a breakout hit, escaping the niche of tabletop wargaming. As exploration is the driving mechanic of most D&D sessions, dungeon masters started dreaming up their own Middle Earth derivatives *en masse.* Then players started tromping around these ersatz but enjoyable creations, with everyone involved consuming countless reams of square and hex grid paper in the process. (For myself, I didn’t even realize hex grid paper *existed* until I saw it used to depict large-scale regions in D&D.)

Second, with a flicker and a beep, home video games landed. Initially, the design of these games was dictated by the philosophies of the arcade. Arcade games were overwhelmingly played standing up in spaces that were public and often busy. Titles emphasized straightforward level design coupled with fast-paced game play that was simple enough that any instructions could be printed in large type on the cabinet.

Then came Warren Robinett's 1980 *Adventure* for the Atari 2600 console. This game grew not from the slightly sticky soil of the arcade, but from the informal recesses of university computer science departments. There, students in particular had the access, time, and privacy to engage with a different kind of game—the text adventure, especially 1976's *Colossal Cave Adventure*, originally written for the PDP-10 mainframe and heavily influenced by D&D. Text adventures created the first computer-hosted worlds to be explored by significant numbers of people. Faced with their complexity, players learned the necessity of sketching maps to plot the links between locations, a task facilitated by the fact that they were invariably seated at some kind of desk, needed to support a bulky terminal.

Adventure brought this design philosophy into the home. Although Robinette had transformed the game play from the textual to the graphical in the process of adapting it to a video console with no keyboard, the idea that the player would have the time and space needed to make maps remained an underlying assumption, clearly illustrated by a complex maze region that practically forces the player to dig out paper and pencil.

Adventure's influence would extend to games written for every console and home computer throughout the 1980s. In addition to establishing the genre of D&D-inspired exploration-based action adventure, it also cemented a key visual grammar for representing large virtual spaces, the flip-screen. Unlike the continuously scrolling terrain used in games like Atari's 1977 *Street Racer*, in a flip-screen game the terrain in view remains fixed in position regardless of the player's movements. When a player exits the area, the entire screen is redrawn with the terrain of another area.

The flip-screen grammar was quickly adopted by many platform games. Home computers with more processing power and memory than the Atari 2600 console hosted titles with dozens of detailed locations, such as 1984's *Jet Set Willy,* which featured complex rooms bearing intriguing names that we chuckled or puzzled over such as "Dr Jones will never believe this," and "We must perform a Quirkafleeg."

The result of these games was a short-lived but widespread form of folk-art: the handmade game map. Even more so than text adventures or D&D, flip-screen based games were suited to encouraging this art form. They were generally 2D games, providing a top-down or side view of the action, which made them straightforward to map. The division of the game space into discrete screens provided an intrinsic metric that made it easy to accurately transfer the games' large scale structure to paper by hand (this was especially critical as capturing screenshots was impossible for most players). Usually, the purpose of such maps was charting the relations between screens rather than the internal detail of each, which also greatly simplified the process. On those occasions when it *was* important to capture internal details, you could pause the game and sketch the outlines of walls and floors. If you were feeling especially fancy, you could even hold a sheet of paper against the curve of the glowing glass of the TV, and make a tracing for a satisfyingly accurate reproduction.

Hence usable maps of these games were relatively easy to make, and their simplicity lent themselves to elaboration, with frequent annotations and color coding in pencil or felt-tip markers. Carried away with cartographic momentum, it was not unusual to go the extra step of adding a nice legend or even a cartouche. This was also done because computer game maps could additionally fulfill one of the major purposes of physical-world personal cartography, information sharing.

Unlike D&D, where no-one outside your party cares about the topography of the ruined castles and mysterious forests you explore (trust me), the details of a mass market computer game are often of interest to many. Today, frustrated players can get hints directly from a game publisher or an enthusiast site via the Internet. But in the 1980s, unless we got lucky and happened upon a helpful article in a computer magazine, we were largely left without any official source of information. We had to turn to each other when we got stuck.

Being able to share a helpful map you'd made yourself demonstrated an enviable level of 8-bit gaming panache, but there was also a flourishing trade in gaming samizdat with maps made by friends-of-friends and friends-of-friends-of-friends copied by hand (and sometimes embellished in the process). These precious documents typically *had* to be copied by hand, as access to photocopying technology was jealously controlled by adults fretting about per page expenses and already suspicious of our devotion to pixellated experiences.

But from this heyday, it was computer games themselves that killed off the handmade mapping of micro cyberspaces, foreshadowing how computing and networking developments would ultimately kill off the rest of personal cartography. First, scrolling around levels—which had been difficult to do on computers that lacked the dedicated hardware features found inside consoles—displaced the flip-screen approach as software and CPUs advanced, with 16-bit home computers replacing 8-bit machines as the 80s drew to a close. It's harder to map terrain that scrolls, because you don't have the convenient yardstick of distance provided by distinct screens.

And then, in 1992, id Software's *Wolfenstein 3D* came to the PC. It wasn't the first game that let you explore a 3D environment—examples can be found throughout the 8-bit era. It wasn't even the first first-person shooter for a personal computer. But it was fast and fluid and immersed us in its simulated world like nothing before. It was also almost impossible to map well by hand—*Wolfenstein* is full of wide rooms with largely featureless floors and ceilings that make it difficult to estimate distances. When I first started playing it, I tried to map some levels in attempt to find all their secrets. The effort was abandoned when I looked at the constellation of distorted shapes I'd scrawled. I realized it would be absolutely useless for suggesting the locations of hidden areas, or even adequately tracking where I'd already checked for secret doors, unless I spent a ridiculous amount of time counting repeating wall textures to gauge distances.

The final nail in the coffin for hand mapping games came with id Software's even more visually spectacular 1995 follow-up, *Doom*. This incorporated a feature that, at the press of a button, automatically displayed a top-down map of the explored portions of a level. It was fantastic. I loved it. And it utterly killed any vestigial interest I might have had in breaking out the pencils and making my own maps.

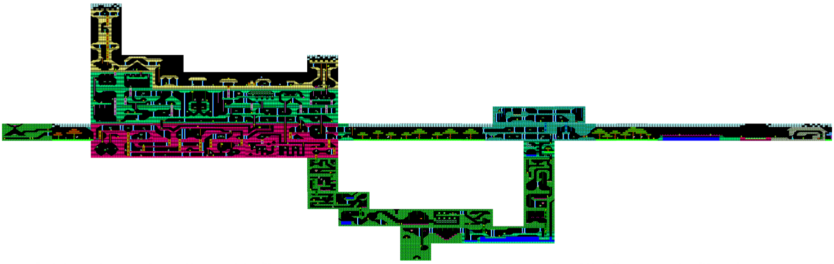
A similar sequence of erosion played out in the real world in the years that followed. In 1996, as dial-up modem speeds crept towards 56 kilobits per second, MapQuest launched as the original big kahuna of web-based mapping. No longer did people need to hope that a copy of a homemade route map was included with the invitation to a remote wedding. Instead, they could print out their own door-to-door custom map, complete with turn by turn directions and an estimate of just how long they'd have in the car to speculate about the other side's family.

Personal cartography was still important for ad hoc occasions when you hadn't had the chance to prepare and print off a map in advance. But then in 2007 the first iPhone was released, complete with a Google Maps app. You still had to figure out just where you were, but once you did, you could conjure a map of your surroundings from the air. The addition of GPS in the iPhone 3G, released a year later, meant you didn't even have to figure out where you were first.

Nowadays, if you want to let a friend know the location of something off the beaten track, you don't draw a map—you drop a pin, and text it to them. In many ways, this is wonderful. When I travelled from my home in New York to Shanghai to cover a conference a few years ago, it was enormously reassuring to let my phone guide me from the train station to my hotel, rather than try to rely on a tourist map or, worse, try to surmount the language barrier with the locals or the street signage, given I have the natural linguistic talent of a small shrub.

But, as with all skills we've delegated to either professionals or machines, there's always a lingering worry—has something important been lost, an absence we'll regret someday? It might be as simple as the loss of the joy in private creation, of exercising one's knowledge of a place so well that you could quickly draft a sparse set of lines that would guide a stranger unerringly to their destination. Or of taking an endlessly reproduced set of bits and making them uniquely yours by reconstituting a game space on your own terms. Our world becomes a little less personal, a little more fungible. Even Terry Pratchett eventually succumbed to the lure of delegation, and began publishing official Discworld maps, standardizing geographies and culminating in a 2013 iPad app that brought his fictional city of Ankh-Morpork to digitally animated life.

Still, the march of technology can also give something back. In 2019 I was replaying one of my favorite games, *Palace of Magic* from Superior Software, originally released in 1987, just a year before *Sourcery* would hit bookstores. Rather than playing it on the original hardware—a BBC Microcomputer—I was playing it using an emulator on my Mac, and it suddenly occurred to me that I could finally realize my teenage dream of creating the perfect game map. *Palace* is a flip-screen platform adventure, so this time as I played through I took screenshots, room after room, all 100 plus of them. I pulled the screenshots into an image editor, manually cropping and stitching them together so that their pixels aligned in a single mosaic. Finally, after an evening of labor, albeit without using any felt-tip pens, I had it. The perfect, complete, map of *Palace*.



And then I posted it on Twitter—where else today can one display their 8-bit panache to their peers?

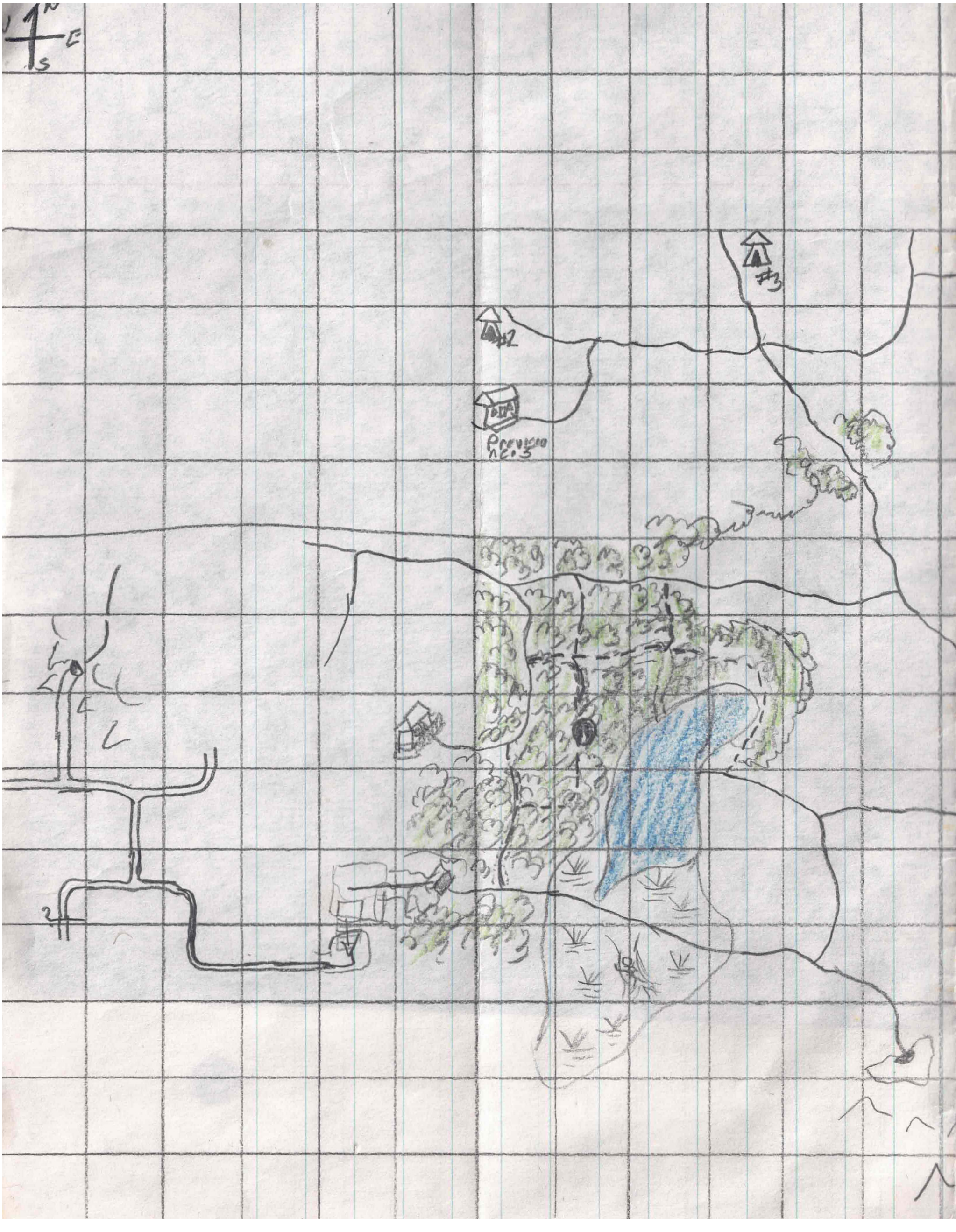
Unbeknownst to me, that was only the start of a personal mapping renaissance. Shortly afterwards, in the wake of *Stranger Things*—a dose of 80s nostalgia streamed into my home via a much faster Internet connection than the one I used to download Mapquest directions—I broke out my old dice and took up again the mantle of dungeon master for a party of work friends. At first we played sporadically, but when Covid 19 confined us to our homes, sessions morphed into a weekly online event. Unfortunately, now I could no longer get away with just using a dry erase pen to sketch walls and doors on a plastic mat as the players explored their surroundings and stumbled into traps—virtual table top software required preparing maps ahead of time. While some of the gap was filled with maps made by others, I still needed a fast way to make reasonably detailed digital maps of my own.

Fortunately, in the years since my hex paper days, a raft of cartographic software has arisen to meet just such a need. After a few false starts, I eventually found a combination that works terrifically for me (for the record, I use Inkarnate for city and regional maps and Dungeondraft, with additional asset packs from Tom Cartos, for small-scale locations).

I doubt that real-world personal cartography will ever make a major comeback this side of an apocalypse, but the unreal remains and even flourishes. Once again, city docks spring out over lake waters as a range of jagged peaks snakes across a continent at my whim. It's so much fun I don't even care if my players slip up and call them the Misty Mountains.

many thanks to contributors:

Skot Armstrong
Stephen Cass
Josh Giesbrecht
Will Heydt
Tegan Webb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